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“And God Saw That It Was Good” Psalm 104; Genesis 1.1–2.3; Romans 8.19–23

KRISTER WHITE

*A sermon given on February 28, 2007, at the Richardson East Church of Christ
in Richardson, Texas.*

There is a lot of controversy over whether global warming is actually occurring, and the source of that controversy lies heavily with the media's coverage of the issue. Scientists seem to be overwhelmingly in agreement that humans are harming the environment. There was a recent study put forward by scientists from 113 different countries that said that there was a 90 percent chance that burning fossil fuels was the primary cause of unnatural temperature increases over the last fifty years. These are scientists from 113 countries. That's what I call communal discernment! But even this news story didn't last long. We have more important things to think about, like which celebrities were named one of *People* magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People" or what the stars were wearing on the red carpet at the Oscars.

I'm also not so naïve as to think that we are all in agreement as to what science says about global warming, but one thing is clear: from the perspective of our faith, environmental stewardship is one of the most neglected forms of Christian hospitality. There are a number of reasons for this, so many that I don't have time to talk about them all, but I would like to spend a little time reclaiming this notion of showing hospitality to creation from a biblical perspective. Somewhere between our understanding of the creation story and our understanding of the end times we have gotten off track.

Growing up I had this terrible chore that I had to complete every Saturday morning called cleaning my room. Being the clever kid I was, I would do everything I could to make it look like my room was clean without actually cleaning it. The key to making this plan work was to throw as much stuff into my closet as possible. My closet had two sliding mirrors that closed it off from the rest of the room, and as long as I could keep my mom from checking in the closet I was as good as gold. My chores were finished in record time and I had that much more daylight to spend outside playing.

Until one day.

Apparently, I had piled up so much stuff in my closet one Saturday that the sliding doors actually came off their tracks. My room had the appearance of being clean, which is all I cared about, but behind my closet doors the evidence was literally growing to the point that I couldn't pretend that it wasn't an issue anymore. Needless to say, when my parents sat me down in front of those two bulging sliding doors to talk about how poorly I had handled the responsibility of cleaning my room, I realized pretty quickly the error of my ways.

That was not a good Saturday.

I spent the rest of that weekend taking everything out of my closet piece by piece and doing my best to organize and clean my room after months of neglect. The task seemed impossible at first, but as time passed

I began to notice a difference, and by Sunday night I had actually completed this seemingly insurmountable job. From that day forward I vowed never to throw my stuff in the closet again, because it only made things more difficult, plus I couldn't afford to replace those sliding doors.

Our relationship with our environment is not unlike my innovative method of cleaning my room. In the first Creation story, God creates humanity and says in Gen 1.26b, "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." A little later in the second creation account in Gen 2.15 it says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." In a way, God gives humanity some chores to accomplish. God tells us that we are to have dominion over the animal world and that we are to take care of the garden. Some believe that God's command for humanity to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing is a kind of Ultimate Fighting Challenge where we are pitted against the created world and are given free reign to dominate and exploit creation. But this is not what God had in mind in Genesis.

Dominion does not mean domination.

This idea of dominion has to do with being good stewards of creation. We are basically hired help for a really wonderful boss. God is so hospitable and so committed to making sure our world is hospitable as well that he shares that responsibility with us. God gives us chores to make sure we keep our environment in prime working condition. God figures it's not too much to ask of people who are created in God's image to take care of a home that he created for them. Before you know it, though, Adam and Eve start to act like they own the place. For those familiar with our Creation story, you know that it's pretty much downhill from there. Eventually God is on the prowl looking for Adam and Eve, who become the first two human beings to exploit creation for their own benefit. Their lack of responsibility gets them kicked out of the garden, but their responsibility to tend to creation remains.

Fast-forward to today, and we will realize that we are also guilty of misunderstanding the nature of our calling with respect to creation. We have thrown our stuff into the environmental closet for so long that the environment itself is beginning to show signs of wear and tear. It is beginning to come off its tracks because we so often take for granted the blessing of our created world. In a world so obsessed with technology, productivity, profit margins, and economic forecasts we simply don't have time to think about the environment. People who are concerned about creation are often labeled as tree huggers or new age pantheists, but from our faith perspective we know that care for creation is one of the foundational commands from God. God desires for us to receive the blessing of the created world as a gift and to take care of this gift. The only problem is that we have inhabited this place for so long we think we own it now. But creation is not a rent-to-own enterprise. There is no mortgage on creation through which we can eventually hand God the last check and take the title showing our ownership. This is one blessing that we can't earn. It has been given to us freely.

We have become a world full of Esaus. We have become so careless that we have given up the blessing for a bowl of soup. God's good creation, one of the foundational acts of divine hospitality, has been given up for lesser things. We are more than willing to take momentary convenience and pleasure at the expense of long-term security. As a result, we purchase vehicles that we know are bad for the environment, we invest heavily in disposable items that are not biodegradable, we obtain our electricity from companies whose primary mode of creating power is through the production of coal burning plants, and we jump at the chance to develop land for businesses, new housing developments, and shopping centers.

When we do such things we are told that we are great capitalists and even better Americans, but we are giving up the blessing of creation for lesser things that will not last. I can only imagine Esau's disappointment after finishing off that bowl of soup and realizing all that he had given up to Jacob simply

because he was hungry. While he was momentarily full, his decision left him ultimately empty. Sometimes our perceived needs get in the way of our ability to discern the long lasting consequences of our actions. As Christians dedicated to making hospitality a way of life, we must wrestle with the urge to give up the blessing of creation for a bowl of soup. As part of God's covenant with humanity, we are stewards of creation, not its owners. But God's covenant with humanity does not end in Genesis 1 and 2.

In Genesis 9 we read the conclusion of the story of Noah's ark. In a sort of divine do-over, God is said to have flooded the earth out of frustration with humanity's wickedness. In order to keep the creation project afloat, however, God makes sure that Noah and a good number of animals are saved from this destruction through the creation of a huge ark. When the water finally recedes, God extends the covenant, saying in Gen 9.12, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you." After this God tells Noah that as a sign of his covenant with humanity and the animal world, he will set his bow in the clouds.

In ancient practice the sign of setting up one's bow was symbolic, for the bow was a weapon used against others. This notion of setting the bow in the sky serves not only as a reminder to God of his covenant, but also as a reminder to us that God will not attempt to wipe out creation again. This story is important to our understanding of hospitality toward creation, for we now begin to realize that God's covenant, while originally with humanity, has been extended to all of creation. While God made it clear that the destruction of the world would not be on God's agenda for the future, there is nothing in the contract that would limit our free will and capacity for choices that might lead to environmental disaster.

But we don't seem that concerned about this possibility. We are often so busy leading a parade to the tune of "This World Is Not My Home" that we fail to recognize the impact this way of thinking has on our concern for and care of creation.

It might sound strange that Christian inhospitality toward creation is often fueled by our understandings of creation and the end times, but it appears that these bookends are often used to support a vision of creation that is ironically unbiblical. I've already discussed how our misunderstanding of dominion has led to an exploitation of creation, but how we view the end times is also important.

By and large, our view of the end times is one that anticipates the destruction of the world, where we are caught up into the skies in spiritual bodies on our way to heaven. This is the notion that is offered by books like the *Left Behind* series, but the majority of the scriptural witness sees things quite differently. Romans 8 tells us that even creation waits in hopes that it will be set free from its bondage to decay and groans in labor pains that it might be redeemed. In Rom 8.23 Paul says, "and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." That last phrase is significant. Do we believe in the immortality of the soul or in the redemption of our bodies? And what difference does this make for environmental hospitality?

I think this is where the crux of the argument rests because we are a people whose lives have been forever changed by the resurrection. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, he was not an ethereal, ghost-like spirit but a resurrected, embodied person who allowed even doubting Thomas to put his hand in Jesus' side. Our God is a God who desires to resurrect and restore. We have seen that in the life of Jesus, and we have experienced it in our own lives. Why is it so hard to believe that God would not extend such hospitality to creation?

In Acts 3.19–21, Peter says, "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets." This doesn't sound like the picture of God that we often paint.

God is not like the gang from *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* who first tears the house down before building a completely new structure. God's form of redemption does not come from annihilation but

through restoration. If God were against the world, if God had decided that the world was set up for eventual destruction, why would Jesus teach us to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”? And what would that say about God’s covenant in Genesis 9? Perhaps we need to rethink how we understand the end times, for God sent his Son because he so loved *the world*, not because he wanted to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through him. It seems to me that God has a pretty high view of creation. If this is true, and if we truly believe that we are partners with God in the world, it makes sense that we must show hospitality to creation.

To deny our responsibility for making room for creation is to sin against God, our neighbors, and those who will come after us. We do not own this place. God has prepared it for us, and we have been put in charge of taking care of it until God returns. When Paul says that the wages of sin is death, nowhere is this better understood than in the natural environment. There appears to be this idea that nature is infinitely resilient, that our environment is like the Energizer Bunny who keeps going and going and going. But even Energizer batteries run out of juice eventually, and the Bunny’s drumming will eventually stop. Our environment is incredibly forgiving, it makes room for humanity even when we fail to return the favor, but the earth’s capacity for lasting hospitality depends on our hospitality to the natural world.

I realize that this may not be a popular message because many believe that taking care of the environment is a political issue, not an issue of faith. But as others have noted, this is not a political issue; it is a moral one. There are things that we know are right, but because they have been presented as being connected to a particular political party we feel like our support must mirror that of our political leanings. For people of faith, caring for creation is not about fulfilling our political duty, it is about fulfilling our role as stewards of God’s good earth, refusing to give up the blessing for a bowl of soup, and working with God to restore a creation marred by human neglect so that we might communicate once again that when it comes to creation, God saw that it was good.

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